

CHRISTIAN SALVATION THROUGH MUSLIM DOMINATION: DIVINE PUNISHMENT AND SYRIAC APOCALYPTIC EXPECTATION IN THE SEVENTH AND EIGHTH CENTURIES

CYNTHIA VILLAGOMEZ

According to the picture painted in Syriac sources from the late seventh century, in Northern Mesopotamia, all of creation was in turmoil. Violent uprisings, wars, plague, famine, and earthquakes were the order of the day for Syriac Christians. The pain from their afflictions was exacerbated by a sense of being subjected to religious and economic oppression at the hands of Muslims. This perception of oppression and futility in overcoming human suffering, a vexing sensitivity to the issue of Christian apostasy, and nervousness over Muslim political instability triggered both apocalyptic fear and hope among the Syriac Christians. The major ways in which they seem to have responded to the problems they faced betray not only their deep despair, but a sense of alienation from fellow believers and from God. Some converted to Islam while others retreated into mystical contemplation. The Syriac Christians expressed their desire for relief and the restoration of order through apocalyptic hope, but there were other forms of escapism such as the retreat into monastic seclusion. Indeed, mystical retreat was the solution for some who thought that they were deeply pious. However, the search for the sweet mysteries of the Spirit were marked by a diminished sense of compassion for fellow human sufferers. A famous Syrian monk of this period wrote, "Love the ease of solitude rather than the satisfying of the hunger of the world and the converting of the multitude of heathens from error to adoring God."¹

Apocalyptic expectation is a response to crises which are perceived to be severely disruptive, threatening massive social upheaval. When such crises trigger a sense of utter despair, the search for future deliverance can be expressed through apocalyptic hope.² In the seventh century, apocalyptic

¹ Mar Isaacus Ninivita, *De Perfectione religiosa*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris: 1909), p. 45.

² Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: The

expectations proliferated among members of different religious groups living under Byzantine, Sasanian, and Muslim rule who perceived their times as a unusually perilous, and marked by religious, economic, and political turmoil associated with bitter religious rivalries, a proliferation of plagues and natural disasters, the last of the Byzantine-Sasanian wars, the Arab conquests, the transition to Islamic rule in formerly Byzantine and Sasanian territories, and the complete demise of the Sasanian empire. Paying close attention to the manner in which the various religious groups interpreted the vexing events of their times in eschatological terms, some modern scholars tend to define the seventh century as a period of retrogression, a "dark age" of cataclysmic changes in the history of western Asia.³

Seventh century Syriac sources provide a counterpoint to the long, dark shadow which has been cast upon the era. There are Syriac sources which paint a positive picture of the period immediately following the establishment of Muslim rule. At the same time, apocalyptic literature of seventh century Syriac Christians has certain features in common with apocalyptic texts of other religious groups of the time such as the expression of deep anxiety over spiritual exhaustion and a consuming desire for order. Political keenness and apocalyptic expectation dominate the Syriac literature from this period.

Apocalyptic expectations transcended religious divisions in both the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. By the middle of the seventh century, a general theme of the unprecedented evil of men and their rulers prevailed as an explanation for the hardships of the time, and the anticipated appearance of both anti-messianic and messianic figures. Syriac apocalyptic developed this theme too, but it seems that it did not appear until the late decades of the century. In the Iraq and Iran, the Jewish messianic uprisings which followed the Muslim conquests and the weakening of Sasanian rule, and the establishment of Muslim rule in former Sasanian lands reflect extreme alienation from religious and political authorities.

The author of the Jewish Apocalypse known as the "Prophecy and Dream of Zerubbabel" explains Heraclius's persecution of Jews in Danielic terms:

Westminster Press, 1984), p. 105. In a recent article entitled, "Muslim Apocalyptic and *Jihad*," David Cook argues that "Apocalyptic is the history of the future; it seeks to point out exactly where humanity is in relation to [a more hopeful] 'future history' and what events will have to take place before it becomes reality." These "Apocalyptic traditions are designed to give people energy and encouragement in difficult situations, certainly in the face of despair. . . ." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, vol. 20 (1996), pp. 66-67.

³ Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, revised ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 133; Robert Hoyland, Historical introduction to *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, by Andrew Palmer (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), pp. xiv-xv.

[There] is no one who will stand before him, and all that do not believe in him will die by the sword; many people will die with them. He will come against the holy and exalted people and there with him [will be] ten kings with strength and a big force.⁴

This document seems to anticipate the fall of the Roman empire,⁵ as does another apocalyptic text (a Messianic Jewish polemical text, most likely of Palestinian provenance) written between 629 and 636 which says that if Rome, the fourth kingdom is "diminished and divided up and broken in pieces, as Daniel said, verily nothing remains save the ten toes, the ten horns, and the fourth beast."⁶ In this text, the Jew Justus argues that the sins of the Jews, which includes their denial of Jesus as the Messiah, are a major reason for the coming of "the little horn which changes all the worship of God, and straightway the end of the world and the resurrection of the dead."⁷

The unexpected victory of the Arab Muslims against the Byzantine armies led Byzantine Christians to speculate that their losses were a sign of God's wrath against Christian sin and weak faith. In the *Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon* (d. 613) written by the monk George after 641, there is a prophecy concerning the impending appearance of the anti-Christ:

[There are] many painful and dangerous things for us—it means instability in our faith and apostasy, and the inroads of many barbarous peoples, and the shedding of much blood, and destruction and captivity throughout the world, the desolation of the holy churches, the cessation of the divine service of praise, the fall and perturbation of the Empire and perplexity and critical times for the State; and further it foreshadows that the coming of the Adversary is at hand.⁸

There has been a recent revival of scholarly interest in Syriac apocalyptic literature which has occurred in the aftermath of a major surge of interest in apocalypticism, and of collaborative attempts to define "apocalypse" as a genre. According to the master paradigm developed by the apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature:

⁴ Brannon M. Wheeler, "Imagining the Sasanian Capture of Jerusalem: 'The Prophecy and Dream of Zerubbabel' and Antiochus Strategos' 'Capture of Jerusalem'," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 57 (1991): 76.

⁵ Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, pp. 207, 211-212.

⁶ A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: 284-602*, 2 vols. (Basil Blackwell and Mott Ltd., 1964; reprint ed., John Hopkins University Press, 1986), I: 316-317; cf., Michael G. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 327.

⁷ Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, I: 316.

⁸ Elizabeth Dawes and Norman Baynes, trans. *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies Translated from the Greek* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), pp. 176-177; cf. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 212.

"Apocalypse" is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.⁹

The Apocalypse Group deliberately left out the question of social setting. Consequently, its phenomenological approach has been criticized for being a *mixtum compositum*—an arbitrary selection of phenomenon, and for placing too much emphasis on literary form to the exclusion of the question of history and *Sitz im Leben*. In reaction to the focus on genre and form, George W.E. Nickelsburg notes, "Largely lacking in scholarship, but highly desirable for a better understanding of the [apocalyptic] documents, are an analysis of the social and cultural factors that gave rise to this literature and its world view, and an attempt to delineate the nature of the communities in and for which these documents were created."¹⁰ Wayne Meeks also argues that eschatological beliefs must be studied within the particular social environment in which they operate. Furthermore, "Characteristically, [these beliefs] introduce innovations in a traditional society, making use of the known and accepted traditions in new combinations in the innovative system of belief."¹¹

Recent studies on Syriac apocalyptic literature have paid a great deal of attention to the social conditions in which apocalyptic expectation arose in Northern Mesopotamia at the end of the seventh century. In addition, scholars have attempted to demonstrate that traditional Syriac literary symbols and themes are employed in the apocalyptic reaction to social crises in the late seventh and early eighth centuries specifically related to the Arab conquests and Muslim political supremacy. These studies have demonstrated the usefulness of studying apocalypses on a regional basis and in terms of smaller cultural units.¹² Moreover, not only does Syriac apocalyptic have "the advantage of being closer than other traditions to the homeland of apocalyptic writing: it has a rich documentation and would help to correct, even at the present stage of research, some widely accepted assumptions on the nature of Christian apocalypticism."¹³

Among these assumptions is the idea that there was a shift away from

⁹ Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting, Semeia*, vol. 36 (1986), p. 2.

¹⁰ George W.E. Nickelsburg, "Social Aspects of Palestinian Jewish Apocalypticism," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, ed. David Hellholm (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983), p. 642.

¹¹ Wayne A. Meeks, "Social Functions of Apocalyptic Language in Pauline Christianity," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, p. 688.

¹² Francisco Javier Martínez, "The Apocalyptic Genre in Syriac: The World of Pseudo-Methodius," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 229 (1987): 338.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

interest in history among apocalyptic writers toward an emphasis on descriptions of the afterlife, preparation for judgement, and personal salvation following the rise of Christianity. According to Francisco Javier Martinez, one of the distinctive features of Syriac apocalyptic is the strong concern shown in them toward historical development and its relation to past and current events. Another defining characteristic is the manner in which typically Syriac ideas are woven into a world-view derived from the book of Daniel.¹⁴ Moreover, the apocalyptic literature from this period is crucial for determining the contemporary Christian understanding of this time. In the literature itself, chaotic events are used to show God's divine order. Equally important, Syriac apocalyptic literature demonstrates a sense of historical causation which is ultimately determined more by Christian moral and spiritual success and failure than anything else. The end of the seventh century was a time when people living under Muslim rule responded to the major problems they faced with apocalyptic expectations. This was particularly true of the population of northern Mesopotamia. This difficult period in the Islamic world was marked by political chaos, wars and violent uprisings, economic hardship, and multiple natural disasters. The Marwanid regime faced serious challenges from rival Muslim groups, as well as renewed Byzantine challenges in Syria. In 690, the Byzantine army gathered against the Muslims in Syria. 'Abd al-Malik was forced to make peace with the Byzantines, "for fear of what [the Byzantine emperor] might do to the Muslims." According to this terms of peace, the caliph was obligated to deliver a thousand dinars to the emperor every Friday.¹⁵

At the end of the seventh century, there were major divisions between Muslims over how justice and order should be carried out. In part, the movements led by 'Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr and al-Mukhtar were reactions to the perception of the Marwanid illegitimacy and injustice. However, the inner turmoil and violent uprisings of the second *fitna*, as well as the challenge from Byzantium not only affected the Muslim community, but also greatly disturbed the Syriac-speaking Christian communities of Northern Mesopotamia.

The Muslim taunt that the "Christians have no Saviour"¹⁶ hit Christians with a particularly hard blow at the end of the seventh century. This a taunt which appears in Syriac apocalyptic. The fear of oppression and the fear that God's favor had been lost made the Christians particularly sensitive to this statement since it is a direct attack on God's special relationship with

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 339.

¹⁵ Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rasul wa'l-muluk*, M.J. De Goeje, ed. (Leiden: 1879-1901); vol. II: 796; Michael Fishbein, trans., *The History of al-Tabari: The Victory of the Marwanids* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 169.

¹⁶ J.G. Reinink, ed. *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (Louvain: *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Scriptores Syri*, vol. 220, 1993); p. 38 Syriac text; Sebastian Brock,

Christians. Where was God? Where and when could Christians find deliverance? Was not the Lord still present in the Sacraments? A Christian who believed it was the end of the world wrote the following lines in his despair over the chastisement of the Ishmaelites: "People . . . will enter into various afflictions to the point of despairing of their lives. Honour will be taken away from priests, the Divine Office and the Living Sacrifice will come to an end in the Church; priests will be like people at that time."¹⁷ Former Christians may have been among the greatest taunters. A famous bishop of Edessa was asked why it was necessary for the doors of the church to be closed when the Eucharist was being offered. He replied, "This is necessary and especially so that the perverts to Islam will not enter and mingle with the believers, disturb them and laugh at the holy mysteries."¹⁸

In the Syriac apocalypses of the late seventh century, the alienation from God is explained as a consequence of Christian sin. The longing for God is expressed in a desire to see his justice, even if it means facing His wrath. Even if His justice was manifested through punishment, He was still actively involved in human affairs. The Christian attitude demonstrated in Syriac apocalyptic literature is one which equates order and mercy with chastisement. Underlying this psyche is a desire to continually see God's presence manifested in the temporal world.

Syriac texts from the late seventh and early eighth centuries which have an apocalyptic character mix historical fact with eschatological prophecy. The exact dates of the apocalyptic texts from this period are difficult to pinpoint. However, whether one argues that they were written before the actual occurrence of events such as 'Abd al-Malik's fiscal reforms or Byzantine-Muslim squirmishes, or in anticipation of them, Syriac apocalyptic texts are critical for the understanding of the mindset of Syrian Christians who continued as large communities in this period. Indeed, some texts are particularly useful in the clarification of the events of the last decades of the seventh century. Since the texts are contemporary reflections on this period, they should be viewed as important sources. They can be used to both supplement and check the later Arabic reports.¹⁹

Sidney Griffith argues that "in Syriac-speaking communities apocalypses

"An Extract from the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," in *The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles*, ed. and trans. Andrew Palmer (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), p. 237 English trans.

¹⁷ Reinink, *ibid.*, p. 35 Syriac text; Brock, *ibid.*, p. 236 English trans.

¹⁸ Arthur Voobus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East* (Louvain: *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Subsidia*, vol. 81, 1988), p. 355.

¹⁹ Acknowledging that apocalyptic texts can be deliberately obscure, Paul Alexander writes,

were the most important literary reactions to the challenge of Islam, from the time of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik until the Abbasid revolution. . . ."²⁰ These texts are significant because they reveal the first intensely negative reactions of Syriac-speaking Christians to Muslim political supremacy. In addition, they demonstrate the Christians' tendency to exam both their own actions in relation to historical developments, and the actions of Muslims in relation to biblical predictions concerning the end of time. The crucial aspect of Christian self-examination demonstrated in the Syriac apocalyptic literature is that it involves the categorization of new historical developments of the Islamic period in terms of an established pattern of historical causation. According to this pattern, negative events are triggered by the sins of the believers. At the same time, the negative events which display God's wrath against sin are viewed as desirable; they are proof of God's transcendent love. The Syriac apocalyptic literature also reveals that Christians believed the advent of the Muslims was divinely ordained. Moreover, God used Muslims to carry out His judgements against the Christians.

The aim of this paper is to recount the picture drawn in the Syriac apocalypses on the seventh century with a focus on events which Syrian Christians viewed as cataclysmic, especially in relation to perceptions of Arabs and of Muslim rule. In addition, the relationship between God's wrath and apocalyptic sensitivity will be addressed as a continuous thread in Syriac literature. This continuum leads to the issue of why there was a proliferation of Syriac literature in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.

This strong historical sense in Syriac literature, marked by a desire for order, has literary antecedents going back to the fourth century. Prior to the late seventh century, Syriac literature demonstrates an apocalyptic sensitivity. Syrian Christians seemed to always be checking for the end of time. However, the tendency was to see difficult times as God's punishment, rather than the dawn of the apocalyptic age. The hymns of Saint Ephraem and the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite reveal this tendency, and can be viewed as antecedents of the seventh century apocalypses.

The mid-fourth century was a difficult period for Syrian Christians. Saint Ephraem, the best known Syrian of his age wrote hymns on the most trying

"It is surprising . . . that apocalypses have not been used as historical sources for late ancient and early medieval times for which the documentation is less [than] satisfactory and where every scrap of information must be used for the reconstruction of events." He suggests that apocalypses could be used to "fill some of the gaps left by more conventional historical texts." "Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources," *The American Historical Review* 73 (1968): 997-998.

²⁰ Sidney H. Griffith, "Muhammad and the Monk Bahira: reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times," *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995): 149.

issues for the Christians of Mesopotamia in his day: the Arian controversy; the emperor Julian's anti-Christian policies; and the war between Julian and the Sasanian emperor Shapur. Christian complacency and God's loving chastisement were themes which echoed throughout Ephraem's writings, just as they would nearly three and half centuries later in the Syriac apocalyptic literature of Northern Mesopotamia.

Ephraem complained that fourth century Christians did not sufficiently appreciate the favor of just imperial authority which God had blessed them with during the reigns of Constantine and Constantius.²¹ Comparing them to Julian, he writes:

The kings who once gave shade,
refreshed us in the heat.
We ate their fruit,
but were ungrateful for their branches,
We had our heart's delight
of good things and shade,
But our mouth became mad
and attacked our Creator.
Wars in the shade
we waged by our speculations;
[Now] He has withdrawn our shade
to let us feel the heat.²²

In Ephraem's view, Julian's reign tested Christian faithfulness. However, compromise with Julian's paganizing policies brought further chastisement. This was the reason that God allowed Ephraem's own city of Nisibis to be taken by the Persians. The city's ill fate was due to the fact that in exchange for Julian's protection, the Nisibenes had allowed a pagan temple to function in their midst. Ephraem harshly denounced his fellow citizens. After the city had wronged its Saviour, "He abandoned it." Nisibis was to become "the city that heralds to the world the shame of its diviners."²³

Although it seemed that its shame was to be perpetual, God had mercy on Nisibis. Salvation came in the unexpected form of Shapur II:

While the king was a pagan priest [i.e. Julian] and
dishonoured our churches,
the Magian king honored our sanctuary.

²¹ Sidney H. Griffith, "Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa, and the Church of the Empire," in *Diakonia. Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer*, T. Halton and J.P. Williman eds. (Washington, 1986), p. 33.

²² Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 110-111.

²³ Sidney H. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymn 'Against Julian': Meditations on History and Imperial Power." *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 249.

He doubled our consolation because he honoured our sanctuary
 he grieved and gladdened us and did not banish us.
 [God] reproved the erring one through his companion in error,
 What the priest abundantly defrauded, the Magian made
 abundant restitution.²⁴

Before Shapur triumphantly took over Nisibis through a peace agreement, his troops had besieged the city. The city had been racked with fear. Of this siege, Ephraem says it was due to the fact that the city "wronged its Savior."²⁵ However, God's chastisement was one of love: "Your chastisement is like that of a mother of our infancy whose rebuke is merciful, in that you have restrained your children from folly—and they have been made wise!" and "He smote the enemy who did not understand that He was teaching us. Blessed be your chastisement."²⁶

Not long after 507 C.E., an Edessan author wrote a chronicle in which he reported on the unprecedented miseries and hardships which challenged the population of Northern Mesopotamia over the course of the previous thirteen years. Addressed to an abbot named Sergius, this Syriac work is appropriately entitled, "A history of the times of affliction which occurred in Edessa, Amid and in the whole of Mesopotamia," and is well-known to modern scholars as the "Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite."²⁷

In his preface, the chronicler acknowledges the almost unbelievable frequency with which the people in the region had met one adversity after another. He reports on a widespread famine from Antioch to the Persian border which was caused by legions of locusts. These locusts devoured all of the crops in their path and laid so many eggs that the air seemed to be vomiting them against the inhabitants of this region.²⁸ Then the famine worsened with the failure of the wheat crop, and the population was forced to live on a diet of dried grapes. As people lost all sense of compassion, they abandoned their children and ate dead carcasses. Yet this was not the extent of this pitiful tale: the people fell victim to a plague of hideous pustules which completely covered their bodies and left them scarred for life. Mental anguish added to the intensity of the people's physical suffering as reports spread of destructive earthquakes in Acre, Tyre, and Sidon, and of the demon torments inflicted on the city of Nicomedia. The author recounts how "a great fire appeared to us blazing in the northern quarter the whole night, and we

²⁴ Han J.W. Drijvers, "The Syriac Romance of Julian: Its Function, Place of Origin and Original Language," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 247 (1992): 206.

²⁵ Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian,'" p. 257.

²⁶ Stephen Bonian, "St. Ephrem on war, Christian suffering, and the Eucharist," *Parole de l'Orient* 11 (1983): 159-160.

²⁷ William Wright, trans. *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite* (Cambridge: 1882), p. 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 38.

thought that the whole earth was going to be destroyed by a deluge of fire.”²⁹ Then matters became even worse as the Sasanian emperor gathered his troops and began to march against Roman territory on the same day as the fire was seen in the sky.

This abrupt movement of Persian troops marked the first invasion of Roman Mesopotamia in over fifty years. What ensued was a bloody war in which the native inhabitants were subjected not only to the attacks and pillaging raids of the Persians and their Arab and Hun allies, but also to the over-taxing demands of the Arabs and Goths who were Roman clients. The chronicler depicts the Persians as a God’s “rod of anger” against the inhabitants of Northern Mesopotamia. He writes, “Now the pleasure of this wicked people is abundantly made evident by this, that they have not shown mercy unto those who were delivered unto them; for they have been accustomed to show their pleasure and to rejoice in evil done to the children of men. . . .”³⁰

In spite of the proliferation of disasters, the author of “The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite” never lapses into total despair. In fact, throughout his work the hope of deliverance underlies the torment caused by the disasters. Already in his preface, as he draws Sergius’ attention to the ravages of the Byzantine-Sasanian war, and the severity of the suffering caused by earthquakes, locusts, famine, and plague, the chronicler feels compelled to ask “. . . at what times did afflictions like these happen with such violence, save in these times in which we live?” Yet, the author stresses to him that these calamities have a positive purpose: the spiritual redemption of men. “I for my part . . . say that these chastisements which have come upon us are sufficient to rebuke us and our posterity, and to teach us by the memory and reading of them that they were sent upon us for our sins. If they did not teach us this, they would be quite useless to us.” The author stresses that the severity of the people’s suffering is at least equal to the full weight of their sins of ingratitude, lasciviousness, greed, and pagan practices, and that the woes he will be recounting should be viewed as necessary, just, and good because they are divine instruments of God’s mercy. He quotes Saint Paul who says, “When we are chastened, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.”³¹

By the year 502, the calamities weighed so heavily upon the population of Mesopotamia that people were tempted to say that the end of the world had come. However, the chronicler believed otherwise. Reflecting on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:6 and Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 and 3, he clarifies that “these things did not happen to us because it was the latter

²⁹ Ibid., ch. 47.

³⁰ Ibid., ch. 3.

³¹ Ibid., ch. 4.

times, but that they took place for our chastisement, because our sins were great." It could not be the end of the world for two key reasons: the Byzantine-Persian war did not encompass the whole world; and the false Christ had not been revealed.³²

In Syriac apocalyptic texts of the seventh century, the chastisement of the Christians is initially depicted as merciless. Yet, their situation is not hopeless. The purpose of the chastisement is not only to punish the sinful, but to test the faithful. "God will be patient," the writer of Pseudo-Methodius claims, "While his worshippers are persecuted, so that through chastisement they may be recognized as children, just as the Apostle proclaimed to us beforehand [in Hebrews 12:8], 'If we are without chastisement, then we will become aliens, and not sons.'"³³

The region of Northern Mesopotamia continued to be subjected to intermittent famines, plagues, and earthquakes throughout the sixth century. In addition, this area suffered from the effects of the Byzantine-Persian wars of the middle sixth and early seventh centuries. Yet neither these events, nor the initial impact of the Muslim conquests seem to have triggered a strong sense of apocalyptic expectation among Syrian Christians. The writer of a Syriac work known as the apocalypse of John the Little, claimed to have received a revelation concerning the events of the last times:

And I beheld and an angel approached me . . . and he brought me scrolls written with the finger of truth and inscribed in them times and generations and the iniquities and sins of men, and the miseries that are to come on the earth . . . And I beheld that there was written on the scrolls what men are to suffer in the last times.³⁴

The writer of the apocalypse of John the Little interprets the rise of the Muslims according to prophecies in the book of Daniel. "God shall send forth a mighty wind, the southern one," the writer proclaims, "and there shall come from it a people of deformed aspect . . . and there shall rise up from among them a warrior, and one whom they call a prophet, and they shall be brought into his hands . . . those like to whom there has not been any in the world." This text alludes to Muhammad's appearance as the fulfillment of Daniel Chapter 11 in which there is a war between the king of the South and the king of the North. In the fifth verse of this chapter, Daniel writes, "And the king of the South shall be strong."³⁵

³² Ibid., ch. 49.

³³ Reinink, *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, pp. 36-37 Syriac Text; Brock, "The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, pp. 236-237 English trans.

³⁴ Han J.W. Drijvers, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period," in *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Vol. 1: *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Problems in the Literary Source Material*. (The Darwin Press, 1992), p. 200.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 200, 202.

Linking the Muslim Arabs with Ishmael, the king of the South, the writer of John the Little says that they will lead a captivity among all the people of the earth, imposing upon them an oppressive tribute. The author of the apocalypse laments that there will be an apostasy of Christians to Islam due to this tribute which is without precedent. Its oppressiveness would leave people with no choice, but to become apostates. "In desperation, "men shall sell their sons and daughters because of their need; and they shall hate their lives and shall wail and weep, and there is no voice or discourse except Woe, Woe!"³⁶ The text of this apocalypse suggests that the Syrian Orthodox Christian community of which the writer was a member, had already experienced a major cleavage. The writer notes that some of the converts to Islam could not have been true Christians. "They shall prosper like bridegrooms and like brides . . . and there shall prosper with them all those who take refuge with them, and they shall enslave to them men renowned in race, and there shall be among them hypocrites, and men who know not God and regard not men except for prodigals, fornicators, and men wicked and vengeful."³⁷

Recent scholarship on Syriac apocalyptic literature has interpreted the above passage as an indication of 'Abd al-Malik's tax reforms. However, this passage is important not only because it may indicate Christian reactions to tax reforms, but also because it demonstrates the sense of urgency and disillusionment which Christians faced during the time of the second *fitna* and 'Abd al-Malik consolidation of power. The reason for this oppression is that God has ordained that the Muslims would have a season to rule so that He could "require the sins of men from their hands."³⁸ Later in the work, the writer of John the Little expresses the hope that the Muslim oppression will come to an end when the Muslims will turn upon one another.

When Syriac apocalyptic writings began to proliferate in northern Mesopotamia in the 680's and 690's, it transcended sectarian divisions among Christians. The Chalcedonian, Syrian Orthodox, and Church of the East communities all produced literature with an apocalyptic character. Notable among the Syriac apocalyptic literature of this period is the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius which was written at Sinjar. Due to the pro-Byzantine bias of this writing, it was probably written by a Chalcedonian. Modern scholarship has devoted more attention to this work than to any other Syriac apocalyptic source. It has interested scholars because of the motif of the Last Roman Emperor, a composite figure drawn from earlier Syriac legends such as the Alexander romance. The idea that this emperor would destroy the

³⁶ Ibid., p. 200.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 204.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 205, 206; Brock, op. cit., p. 225.

Muslim empire was borrowed by other Syriac writers. However, scholars have not only been interested in the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius because of its incorporation of native Syrian symbols and themes, but also because soon after its completion, translations of it into Greek, Latin, and Slavonic provided the basis for the legend of a last Christian ruler who would destroy Islam.

The *Resh Melle* of John Bar Penkaye is often compared to the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. Although this literary work does not make the claim of being a divinely revealed text, its writer demonstrates a deep conviction that he was living at the end of time. This work is important because it is written from the perspective of someone belonging to the Church of the East. The apocalypse of John the Little is a work that has been dated to either the end of the seventh, or beginning of the eighth century. Its author belonged to the Syrian Orthodox community and probably wrote in Edessa. This work seems to be partly derived from Pseudo-Methodius.

In spite of the fact that they represent the thoughts of Christians from different communities, the three apocalypses mentioned above reveal some striking similarities besides an awareness of political events of the late seventh century. Namely, the rise and impending fall of the Muslim empire is believed to signify that the end of the world is in view. The economic oppression and violence Christians suffer at the hand of Muslims are interpreted not only as God's chastisement of His children, but signs of the coming end. Moreover, Muslim political instability and rivalries are cast in an eschatological framework derived from scripture, and are viewed as clear warnings of the end of time.

According to the writer of Pseudo-Methodius, "In this last millennium, . . . the Children of Ishmael will come out of the desert of Yathrib and all come and collect there at Gab'ot Ramta. . . . [The] kingdom of the Greeks will be devastated [there] . . . by Ishmael, 'the wild ass of the desert,' who will be sent in the fury of wrath against mankind. . . ." ³⁹ In this passage alluding to the battle of Yarmuk, the writer's powerful and frightening image of Muslim Arabs clearly has eschatological meaning: the Muslim conquests and defeat of Byzantium are divinely ordained and fit into a Danielesque scheme of history. However, the ascendancy of the "Children of Ishmael" has nothing to do with them having favor in God's eyes. They are allowed to initiate a "merciless punishment" and "enter the kingdom of the Christians . . . because of the wickedness and sin which is performed at the hands of the Christians, the like of which has not been performed in any of the former generations." ⁴⁰

³⁹ Reinink, *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, pp. 23-25 Syriac text; Brock, "The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," pp. 230-231 English trans.

⁴⁰ Reinink, *ibid.*, p. 25 Syriac text; Brock, *ibid.*, p. 231 English trans.

It has already been mentioned that modern scholarship on Syriac apocalyptic has focused primarily on the image of Last Roman Emperor, the Christian descendant of Alexander the Great. However, there are other leit-motifs representing the impetus toward Christian salvation in Syriac apocalyptic.⁴¹ For example, a source of comfort to Christians was the notion that God's divine order was clear: His justice continued to rule and His judgments were clearly present; on the one hand, Christians were continuing to be punished for their disobedience, but at the same time, Muslims were being punished for their sins, including their acts of oppression against Christians. Thus, the Muslims' internal political conflicts and their problems with the Byzantine empire were clear evidence of God's disfavor toward them.

At the end of the seventh century, the monk John bar Penkaye paid careful attention to the events which had unfolded near Nisibis, anticipating that the end of the world would be soon. He believed that he was living at the "beginning of the pangs." God was chastening the Christians seven times over for their sins. "All the words of the prophets and all the curses of the law and the Apostles came to fulfillment concerning us," John wrote in the fifteenth chapter of his *Rish Melle*.⁴² In its laxity, his generation was imprisoned by this chastisement: "We were plundered and scattered over the whole earth; we were in anguish . . . like Cain shaking and quivering on the earth." What further oppression could be laid upon his generation? He saw plague and famine, "impossible to escape or run away from." Whatever was left after the plague and famine was taken by raiders.⁴³

Of particular importance to John was the fact that wickedness had increased while the love of Christians had grown cold, just as Christ had predicted. No one could be trusted. Forlorn, John complained that no one seemed to love his brother "with a love appropriate to our Lord." In this time of desperate need, no comfort could be found in other men. When support appeared, it was done for the semblance of piety, and not in truth. "Truly, I am aware that the end of the ages has arrived for us; I know this from the holy Scriptures, and in particular from our Lord's last words," John wrote. "Everything has been fulfilled," he explained; "Men have become deceitful and self-loving, traitors, brutish, haters of all that is good, enslaved to lusts, rather than to the love of God; they have the outward appearance of piety,

⁴¹ G.J. Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, pp. 149-187; Francisco Javier Martinez, "The Perception of Rome and the 'Roman' Empire in the Syriac Tradition," *Eighth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference Abstract of Papers* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 38-39; J.P. Alexander, "The Medieval Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and its Messianic Origin," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978): 1-15.

⁴² A. Mingana, ed. "*Ktāba d-Rish Melle*," *Sources Syriacques* I (1908), p. 162 Syriac text; S. Brock, "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century: Book XV of John Bar Penkaye's *Ris Melle*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 9 (1987): 69 English trans.

⁴³ Mingana, op. cit., p. 162; Brock, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

but they are far removed from its true meaning.”⁴⁴ For John the true meaning of piety was not only correct belief, but charity of heart.

The political signs which John believes point to the end of the world are those specifically connected to the second *fitna*. He claims that it was the wars and battles of the second *fitna* by which God “awoke us and summoned us to repentance.”⁴⁵ John provides detailed information on the second *fitna*. For example, he notes that after God puts down the sinful Yazid, the career of ‘Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr begins. Elaborating on the role of Zubayr in the *fitna*, John writes:

He made it known about himself that he had come out of zeal for the house of God, and he was full of threats against the Westerners, claiming that they were transgressors of the law. He came to a certain locality in the South where their sanctuary was, and lived there. Preparations for war were made against him and he was overpowered; in this way they even burnt their own sanctuary, as well as spilling much blood there. From that time on the kingdom of the Arabs was no longer firmly established.

John depicts the events of the second *fitna* as God’s way of initiating the imposition of order upon disorder. Since the Christians did not heed the warning signs of the second *fitna*, but remained in their wicked ways, they were subjected to further punishment in the form of famine, earthquake, and plagues. “He handed over” John’s “sinful generation to bitter afflictions, the like of which had not been experienced before.” What the Christians “sowed, they also reaped.”⁴⁶

God’s protective grace had been removed from Christians. Still, He was close at hand John expressed the Christian yearning to keep faith even in the worst of times, and to maintain an intimacy with God. “Here is the kingdom of the Lord. We began with Him, and we have committed (everything) into His hand; for everything (stems) from Him, everything is in Him, and everything (takes place) through Him.”⁴⁷ In some sense, the wrath of God was reassuring. It was proof that God was still actively involved in the affairs of His children.

Indeed, John did live in hard times. John’s allusions to the devastation of monasteries are particularly telling about the sense of hopelessness. Traditionally, the monasteries were the haven of those who sought to make complete atonement for their sins, and of the helpless who had no hope of relief except through Christian charity. Where would people go to seek spiritual and physical deliverance if even the monasteries could not help? “Because the poor have perished from hunger, and orphans and widows have faded

⁴⁴ Mingana, op. cit., pp. 165-166; Brock, op. cit., pp. 72-73.

⁴⁵ Mingana, op. cit., p. 160; Brock, op. cit., p. 68.

⁴⁶ Mingana, op. cit., p. 159; Brock, op. cit., p. 67.

⁴⁷ Mingana, op. cit., p. 168; Brock, op. cit., p. 74.

away from lack of anyone to support them; monasteries and convents have become ruined as the monks and holy men were scattered.”⁴⁸ The extent of human suffering was seen as being in perfect measure to Christian sins. God was showing his mercy through punishment.

It is difficult to say why it was in the late seventh century that Syriac writers interpreted the calamities of their time as not only punishments from God, but also as signs of the end of time. Prior to the rise of Islam, even when there were wars and natural disasters, there was no fear of mass Christian apostasy. Furthermore, quick political restoration and economic relief often immediately followed crisis periods. For example, the Byzantine emperor Anastasius granted a major tax break to the people of Northern Mesopotamia following the Byzantine-Sasanian war of the late fifth-early sixth centuries. In the early eighth century, once Marwanid power had been firmly established, the tone of Syriac apocalypses changed, and the end did not seem so imminent. An apocalypse from this period known as the Edessene fragment does not mention the sins of Christians as the reason for God’s wrath. Instead, it predicted that the Orient would be laid to waste because of the sins of Muslims.⁴⁹ The text might suggest that the Christians were coming to terms with their position within the Muslim world. In fact, the lack of self-examination and guilt might suggest that Christians were somehow more comfortable with their position. In some locales, the conditions of Christians actually may have improved. A possible key to this change may be indicated in rarely cited Syriac hagiographies that suggest Christians received financial endowments and were under the protection of both ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Hajjaj.⁵⁰ Certainly, this change is something that needs further study.

ABSTRACT

Syriac apocalyptic texts are among the most important literary responses to the rise and establishment of the Islamic state in the indigenous lands of Syriac-speaking Christians. The apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius and other Syriac apocalyptic sources are used to demonstrate the negative reactions of Christians to Muslim political authority. These reactions are discussed in relation to Syriac patterns of response to crisis in the pre-Islamic period which explained wide-spread, severe suffering in the physical world as a consequence of Christians’ sins, but also a demonstration of God’s chastizing love.

⁴⁸ Mingana, op. cit., p. 164; Brock, op. cit., p. 71.

⁴⁹ F. Nau, “Revelations et Legendes. Methodius. Clement.—Andronicus,” *Journal Asiatique* 9, series 11 (1917): 426-427 Syriac text; S. Brock, “The Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment,” in *The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 244 English trans.

⁵⁰ S. Brock, “A Syriac Life of John of Dailum,” *Parole de l’Orient* 10 (1981-1982): 139-140; 148-149; 165, 167-168; 187, 188-189.